

## **‘Rouge-Brun or Counterrevolutionary? Another Look at Michel Houellebecq’s Politics’**

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### **Abstract**

**Michel Houellebecq** has gained a reputation for combining left-wing critiques of **neo-liberal capitalism** with reactionary laments at the decline of nation, religion, honest labour, and the patriarchal family. Critics typically thus either declare the novelist to be unclassifiable in political terms or to be a **‘rouge-brun’**. Surveying Houellebecq’s novels, from *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) to *Sérotonine* (2019), we argue that there is nothing unclassifiable, ‘rouge’ or left-wing about the author’s political worldview. On the contrary, his work needs to be understood as belonging to a tradition of **French counterrevolutionary thought**, personified by **Auguste Comte** and **Charles Maurras**.

## *ROUGE-BRUN* OR COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY?

### ANOTHER LOOK AT MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S POLITICS

In an article in *Le Monde* that coincided with the publication of Michel Houellebecq's latest novel, *Sérotonine* (2019), the French literary critic, Bruno Viard, declared the novelist to be 'inclassable' in political terms. Apparently left-wing in his criticisms of contemporary capitalism, Houellebecq seems to be right-wing in his rejection of the liberalisation of social and sexual mores. To quote Viard: 'Houellebecq est donc foncièrement anti-libéral, à la différence de la gauche, anti-libérale en économie mais libérale en morale, et de la droite, qui occupe la position inverse. Il est donc inclassable' (Viard 2019).<sup>1</sup> On the face of it, *Sérotonine* would seem to confirm Viard's assessment, insofar as it combines an apparently ecologically informed critique of the liberalisation of global trade policies with conservative laments at the decline of organised religion, aristocracy, patriarchy and the French *terroir*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Viard's assessment of Houellebecq's ambiguous political affiliations chimes with what seems to have become the critical consensus on this question. Thus Gavin Bowd has classified Houellebecq as a 'rouge-brun', or left-conservative, whose writings occupy 'an ideological realm where extremes of right and left meet in anti-Americanism, anti-socialism and racism'.<sup>3</sup> Carole Sweeney arrives at much the same conclusion. She argues that since Houellebecq's novels are characterised by a combination of apparently left-inspired critiques of neo-liberalism with reactionary views on ethnicity, feminism and the patriarchal family, they 'cannot be easily placed' in political terms. Sweeney echoes Bowd in concluding that Houellebecq is 'a *rouge-brun* or left-conservative writer'.<sup>4</sup>

Each of these critics shares the same assumption, namely that anti-capitalism is inherently, even exclusively left-wing, and therefore sits uneasily with any criticism of the

liberalisation of political practices and social and sexual mores. On the basis of this assumption, Houellebecq is then judged unclassifiable in conventional political terms, representing some strange hybrid of left and right-wing beliefs; in short, he is a ‘rouge-brun’. However, this is rather a strange assumption to make, given that there is a long tradition of right-wing French political thought that is highly critical of the corrosive effects of a liberalised economy on France’s social and moral order. For counterrevolutionary thinkers from the conservative Auguste Comte to the full-blown reactionary nationalist Charles Maurras, liberal or *laissez-faire* economics was inseparable from the liberalisation of political rights, social and sexual mores. All of these forms of liberalisation had been heralded by the Revolution of 1789 and, for right-wing thinkers like Comte and Maurras, all represented equally destructive forms of liberal individualism, whose effects in eroding the institutions of organised religion, the patriarchal family, productive labour, and the nation itself were to be lamented.<sup>5</sup> Further, this lament at the destructive effects of economic liberalism often had an ecological element insofar as the French counterrevolutionary tradition advocated a return to small-scale agricultural production and the supposedly unchanging certainties of the French *terroir*. The ecological concerns of *Sérotonine* might thus also be seen to owe more to that older counterrevolutionary tradition than to any modern, left-leaning current of green politics.

There is, thus, nothing new or unusual in the combination of a certain brand of anti-capitalism with a conservative social, moral and political worldview, the very combination of political positions that characterises Houellebecq’s novels. As Adam Gopnik rightly points out in his review of *Soumission* (2015), the novel is clearly informed by ‘the ideology of conservative anti-capitalism in the form it took a century ago, more or less benignly in Chesterton and Belloc, and decidedly less benignly in the likes of Charles Maurras’.<sup>6</sup> Yet as we have noted, Gopnik’s insightful comments aside, Houellebecq’s potential affinities with that earlier tradition of counterrevolutionary anti-capitalism have been largely overlooked,

obscured by the mistaken assumption that to be anti-capitalist is necessarily to be on or at the very least indebted to the Left. Houellebecq's admiration for Comte is quite explicit, evident as much in the comments of his narrators and fictional characters as in his own essay praising the thinker.<sup>7</sup> As such, the novelist's debts to Comtean sociology have attracted some critical attention.<sup>8</sup> Yet no commentator has considered the possibility that Houellebecq's reading of Comte may have significant affinities with the uses to which Maurras put the same thinker in elaborating his reactionary counterrevolutionary politics. Those who have thus far criticised Houellebecq's apparently reactionary affiliations have focused on his tendency to reproduce demeaning racist and Islamophobic stereotypes in his writings.<sup>9</sup> Rather than rehearsing such criticisms, this article will examine a different, if closely related question, namely the extent to which Houellebecq's anti-capitalism is itself consistent with the French counterrevolutionary tradition. It will argue that rather than being a 'rouge-brun', Houellebecq is better understood as a novelist who rehearses and updates certain of the characteristic themes and tropes of a tradition of counterrevolutionary anti-capitalism personified, in its moderate form, by Comte and, in its most reactionary form, by Maurras.<sup>10</sup>

One of the fundamental differences separating Comte from Maurras relates to the nature of the solutions each thinker offers to the dislocation of French society that both attribute to the corrosive effects of liberalism, in its economic as much as in its social, political and cultural manifestations. According to Comte, the liberalism heralded by the French Revolution, although destructive of social and moral order, would nonetheless prove salutary in sweeping away the anachronistic structures of the *ancien régime* and hence paving the way for a new 'industrial age', in which society would be ruled on rational, scientific principles by an elite of sociologists and industrialists (*Cours*, pp. 442–520). Maurras, by contrast, was far less optimistic; for him, the dislocations of liberalism were in no way salutary and needed to be combatted by staging a return to what had gone before, in the form

of a restored monarchy; a return to the *terroir* and to small-scale agricultural or artisanal forms of production organised in guilds or professional corporations; the restoration of organised religion; of the patriarchal family; and hence of national integrity (*O.C.*, vol. 2). As we survey Houellebecq's output, it will become clear that his various novels see him testing these two options in fictional form, alternating between an apparent advocacy of a kind of Comtean technocratic solution and a preference for Maurras's more retrograde politics. This means that a considerable amount of ambiguity will remain concerning Houellebecq's political position, rendering it unclear whether he is closer to Comte or to Maurras as regards the precise form of counterrevolutionary anti-capitalism he advocates. Nonetheless, this residual ambiguity in no way negates the value of situating Houellebecq within that earlier tradition of right-wing anti-capitalism rather than continuing to work on the mistaken assumption that to be anti-capitalist must be to be left-wing.

### Sex and the Market

It is in Houellebecq's first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), that the notion that economic liberalism and the liberalisation of sexual morality are inseparably related is first sketched out. The novel's unnamed narrator, a disaffected unmarried software engineer in his thirties, is convinced that liberalism, whether understood as an economic doctrine based on unrestrained competition or a social philosophy involving the liberalisation of sexual mores, is responsible for the difficulties he faces both at work and in his personal life. Indeed, the title of the novel refers precisely to the narrator's perception that the 'domain of struggle', the merciless competition between actors in the economic field has, with the liberalisation of gender roles and sexual relationships, now 'extended' to permeate the realm of interpersonal relations also:

Dans un système économique où le licenciement est prohibé, chacun réussit plus ou moins bien à trouver sa place. Dans un système sexuel où l'adultère est prohibé, chacun réussit plus ou moins à trouver son compagnon de lit. En système économique parfaitement libéral, certains accumulent des fortunes considérables; d'autres croupissent dans le chômage et la misère. En système sexuel parfaitement libéral, certains ont une vie érotique variée et excitante; d'autres sont réduits à la masturbation et la solitude. Le libéralisme économique, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société. De même, le libéralisme sexuel, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société.<sup>11</sup>

A loser in the increasingly competitive market for sexual partners, the narrator will spend much of the novel lamenting his inability to find a suitable marriage companion, settle down and have children.

Indeed, throughout the novel the narrator seems haunted by the spectre of the marriage and fatherhood that elude him. Contemplating the isolated and anomic nature of his existence, he imagines a small boy playing with some toy soldiers, who may still possess some of the same hopes and expectations for his future as the narrator himself has been forced to abandon. Yet, he laments: 'Depuis le divorce, il [l'enfant] n'a plus de père. Il voit assez peu sa mère, qui occupe un poste important dans une firme de cosmétiques' (*Extension*, p. 13). Later, the narrator muses of his younger colleague Bernard, 'Un type comme lui devrait avoir des enfants; s'il avait des enfants, on pourrait espérer qu'il finisse par sortir quelque chose de ce grouillement de petits Bernards. Mais non, il n'est même pas marié. Fruit sec' (*Extension*, pp. 18–19).

These laments at the impossibility of marriage, family and paternity appear to partake unequivocally of a fundamentally conservative vision of the social world. Yet, for a critic such as Sweeney, Houellebecq's critique of the effects of unfettered capitalism also contains 'an echo' of Marxism and it is this strange combination of right and left-wing motifs that qualifies the novelist as a 'rouge-brun'. To quote Sweeney: 'The assertion that capitalism is extending ever further into all areas of human life and particularly into relations between humans is, of course, merely an echo of Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*'s declaration that capital "has resolved personal worth into exchange value" and "has left remaining no other nexus between person and person than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment"' (Sweeney, p. 45). However, there is nothing specifically or exclusively Marxist about registering the corrosive effects of unfettered capitalism on interpersonal relationships; this is a recurrent theme in conservative anti-capitalism also. What distinguishes conservative or counterrevolutionary anti-capitalism from Marxism is the way in which the former articulates its critique of the commodification of interpersonal relationships to a lament at the waning of *traditional* forms of marriage and paternity. Those traditional forms are themselves then typically placed alongside organised religion and honest labour as representing vital guarantors of social and moral order. In *Extension*, Houellebecq sketches a critique of contemporary liberalised capitalism that rests precisely on positing a close interrelationship between these classic counterrevolutionary themes of family, patriarchy, organised religion, and honest labour. Moreover, he does so in a manner that suggests his novel owes much more to the anti-liberalism of a thinker like Maurras than it does to any Marxist or *marxisant* school of thought.

In his 1905 essay 'Libéralisme et libertés', Maurras sketches out a critique of both political and economic liberalism that seems to anticipate *Extension*'s critique of economic and sexual liberalisation in important respects. Maurras argues that, in the wake of the 1789

Revolution, political liberalism, according to which all citizens were accorded equal rights and freedoms, was mirrored in the economic liberalism that, by means of the Chapelier Decree of 1791, abolished the guilds and professional corporations. Both reforms had worked together to reduce all French workers to the status of atomised individuals competing as equals in a now deregulated labour market. In the economic domain, then, liberalism had left the individual worker defenceless against exploitation by ruthless capitalists:

Dans l'ordre économique, la liberté-principe veut que la concurrence des libertés individuelles, d'où le bien doit sortir inévitablement, soit œuvre sacrée. Il n'y a qu'à laisser faire et laisser passer. Toute intervention de l'État ou de la société mérite le nom d'attentat et presque de profanation. Le statut du travail doit donc être individuel. Autant par respect pour sa liberté propre que par vénération de la mécanique du monde, l'ouvrier doit respecter les injonctions du décret de Chapelier et s'interdire sévèrement toute association, corporation, fédération, tout syndicat d'ordre professionnel de nature à troubler le libre jeu de l'offre et de la demande. Tant pis si le marchand de travail est un millionnaire maître absolu du choix entre 10 000 ouvriers: liberté, liberté! La liberté économique aboutit donc, par une déduction rapide, à la célèbre liberté de mourir de faim.<sup>12</sup>

If economic liberalism, through its destruction of the corporations, was leaving workers defenceless against exploitation, Maurras argued that an analogous process was happening in the political and social domains. Political liberalism, by insisting on the equality of all individuals regardless of their particular characteristics, was abstracting them from all of those social, familial, religious, and identitarian structures that gave their lives meaning and order, reducing them to the status of atomised individuals in the social domain, just as liberal economics had atomised them in the economic domain. As Maurras put it: 'Le



libéralisme veut dégager l'individu de ses antécédences ou naturelles ou historiques. Il l'affranchira des liens de famille, des liens corporatifs, et de tous les autres liens sociaux ou traditionnels'. In the face of these threats, Maurras thus called on his readers to 'faire la guerre au libéralisme', precisely by means of the policies we enumerated above, namely a restoration of the corporations, of small-scale agricultural and artisanal production, of organised religion, family, and the monarchy ('Libéralisme', n.p.).

Maurras's claim, then, is that the liberalisation of the labour market and the theoretical equality enjoyed by every worker entering that market are merely the precursors to intensified competition and exploitation. The narrator of *Extension* simply extends this analysis to the domain of sexual relationships: he argues that the liberalisation of sexual interactions and the theoretical equality enjoyed by every participant in the sexual marketplace are merely the precursors to an analogous form of intensified competition. Just as Maurras maintains that the atomised individual worker has only gained the freedom to starve to death, *Extension's* narrator insists that participants in a liberalised sexual market have merely gained the freedom to be starved of sex, love and the consolations of marriage and fatherhood.

As we have seen, Maurras not only argued that economic, social and political liberalism was eroding the ties of family and community that prevented society descending into an anarchic, disaggregated mass of atomised individuals. He also maintained that those forms of liberalism had eroded the meaning, discipline and sense of social identity that might be engendered through honest labour organised in the hierarchical structures of the old guilds or corporations. The narrator of *Extension* draws this same parallel between liberalism's erosion of familial and interpersonal relations, on the one hand, and its undermining of the structure and meaning guaranteed by earlier forms of labour, on the other. The narrator is a software engineer charged with the provision of a new IT package to one of his company's

primary clients, the French Ministry of Agriculture. The extent to which the narrator holds his profession responsible for an erosion of the social bond analogous to that provoked by the liberalisation of sexual mores is highlighted at a leaving do for one of his colleagues, Jean-Yves Fréhaut. In his farewell speech, Fréhaut sketches out his utopian vision of the role of IT in fostering a new networked, communicative society:

Il comparait en quelque sorte la société à un cerveau, et les individus à autant de cellules cérébrales, pour lesquelles il est en effet souhaitable d'établir un maximum d'interconnexions. Mais l'analogie s'arrêtait là. Car c'était un libéral, et il n'était guère partisan de ce qui est si nécessaire dans le cerveau: un projet d'unification. (*Extension*, p. 40)

Fréhaut's 'liberal' vision seems to represent an updated version of the spectre that haunts French counterrevolutionary thought, from Comte to Maurras, the fear that liberal individualism is destroying any organic social bond, leaving in its place an anarchic, disaggregated mass of atomised individuals. Further, in lamenting the vacuity of his own profession, the narrator will appeal to apparently more authentic forms of artisanal labour and to religious faith in a manner that seems equally indebted to the counterrevolutionary tradition of anti-capitalism. As he explains, the software package for which he is responsible is named 'Sycomore' and is written in Pascal. This leads the narrator to reflect mournfully on the contrast between the immaterial software package for which he is responsible, on the one hand, and, on the other, a material maple tree, the craftsmen who appreciated its qualities, and the real Pascal, a celebrated French philosopher and theorist of religious faith:

Le véritable sycomore est un arbre apprécié en ébenisterie, fournissant en outre une sève sucrée, qui pousse en certaines régions de la zone tempérée froide; il est particulièrement

répandu au Canada. Le progiciel Sycomore est écrit en Pascal, avec certaines routines en C++. Pascal est un écrivain français du XVIIe siècle, auteur des célèbres *Pensées*. (*Extension*, p. 20)

A similar glimpse of authentic honest work and genuine spiritual value is offered to the narrator in the course of his business trip to the Sables-d'Olonne, in the Vendée region, where he is overseeing the installation of the 'Sycomore' software package in the local Ministry of Agriculture offices. As he walks along the seafront, the narrator spots a Romanesque church and imagines:

l'ancienne vie des pêcheurs sablais, avec les messes du dimanche dans la petite église, la communion des fidèles, quand le vent souffle au-dehors et que l'océan s'écrase contre les rochers de la côte. C'était une vie sans distractions et sans histoires, dominée par un labeur difficile et dangereux. Une vie simple et rustique, avec beaucoup de noblesse. Une vie assez stupide, également. (p. 107)

The dignity and simplicity of the fishermen's dangerous labours, as well as their regular religious worship, is thus contrasted to the vacuity of the narrator's own profession. For, as we have seen, that profession involves a kind of perversion of both honest manual labour and genuine religious faith, in the form of a computer programme named 'Sycomore' that bears no relation to either a tree or to craftsmanship and that relies on a computer language named 'Pascal' that bears only a tenuous relation to the author of the *Pensées*, itself a renowned Christian apologetic. It is surely no coincidence that this paeon to a lost way of life, based around religious faith and honest toil, should be provoked by a visit to the Vendée region, a

region that occupies an elevated position in the French counterrevolutionary tradition as the site of the Royalist and Catholic uprising against the French revolution in 1793.

Earlier in the novel, depressed at the emptiness of his personal and professional lives, the narrator expresses a desire to leave Paris for the Vendée: ‘j’avais assez d’envie d’aller en Vendée. La Vendée me rappelait de nombreux souvenirs de vacances (plutôt mauvais du reste, mais c’est toujours ça)’ (p. 84). The Vendée, the counterrevolutionary location par excellence, thus clearly has a particular significance for the narrator. It is noticeable that he nonetheless undercuts any apparent idealisation of that region in each of his final sentences – the life of the Sablais fishermen was ‘assez stupide’; his memories of holidays in the Vendée are ‘plutôt mauvais du reste’. That the narrator thus affects a kind of cynical distance towards these two counterrevolutionary locations seems to create two primary effects. First, it enables the narrator, and through him Houellebecq, to distance himself from the reactionary ideals he nonetheless evokes, according to a logic of disavowal that, as Martin Crowley has argued, is typical of Houellebecq’s fiction.<sup>13</sup> Second, it emphasizes the extent to which these more authentic values have been rendered so inaccessible by the hegemony of liberalism as to make even their evocation faintly ridiculous. This sense of the impossibility of ever reclaiming the authentic values represented by a region such as the Vendée is also evident in the narrator’s description of his visit to an equally important location in the French counterrevolutionary tradition.

In the course of another business trip, the narrator stays overnight in Rouen, leaving his hotel to visit the city’s Place du Vieux Marché, the site where the English burned Joan of Arc at the stake. He is disgusted to find that the starkly modernist design of the square’s church renders it indistinguishable from adjoining shops and a bus station (*Extension*, p. 69). Joan of Arc is, of course, one of the most enduring icons of the counterrevolutionary, nationalist tradition in French politics and it is difficult not to read the narrator’s

disorientation at visiting the site of her demise as a lament at the desecration of her memory by a combination of modernist town-planning, consumerism, and the erosion of the city's industrial base – the centre of the city is described as being overrun by 'des dizaines de loubards' who come from 'la banlieue rouennaise, qui est en voie d'effondrement industriel complet' (p. 68). Here, then, the disappearance of honest productive labour is associated with the commodification and hence desecration of a site invested with profound spiritual value by the counterrevolutionary tradition.

*Extension* thus contains a whole series of right-wing, counterrevolutionary themes and motifs: the conflation of economic with political and social liberalism, all seen as sources of France's current social and moral decline; the lament at the loss of family, religion, and honest labour as guarantors of social cohesion and moral probity; the evocation of iconic counterrevolutionary figures (Joan of Arc) and locations (the Vendée). At the novel's end, the narrator will retreat to another location that occupies a central role in conservative and counterrevolutionary anti-capitalist traditions, namely *la France profonde*, the *terroir*. Suffering from the effects of depression and mental breakdown, he abandons Paris and his job, seeking solace and sanctuary in an isolated village in the Ardèche, the region in which his parents were born and brought up. Here, however fleetingly, the narrator glimpses 'la possibilité de la joie' (p. 156).

It is therefore difficult to see anything that might qualify as 'rouge' or left-wing in the depressing portrait the unnamed narrator paints of contemporary French society in *Extension*. On the contrary, the novel seems to rehearse a whole series of tropes, themes and motifs that are characteristic of French conservative anti-capitalism, in general, and of Maurras's brand of counterrevolutionary thought, in particular. As we have noted, for Maurras, as for Comte, the original source of the corrosive effects of economic, social and political liberalism was to be found in the flawed thinking behind the Revolution of 1789. In his later novels, notably

*Les Particules élémentaires* (1998), Houellebecq attributes an analogous role to what he sees as the flawed liberal philosophies behind May 1968 and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s.

#### From 1789 to May '68 and the Sexual Revolution

Maurras argues that liberalism first secured its hegemony over French society in the wake of the Revolution of 1789. This revolution, he maintains, was inspired by the theories of the misguided eighteenth-century *philosophes*, who imported foreign ideas about individualism, freedom of conscience and equality into Catholic France from the protestant 'Anglo-Saxon' countries. As Maurras points out, Montesquieu and Voltaire spent extended sojourns in England, while Rousseau was never really French at all, having been born in protestant Switzerland (*O.C.*, vol. 2, pp. 31–59). Maurras's diagnoses of the origins of a destructive liberal individualism in the 1789 Revolution have a direct equivalent in Houellebecq's accounts of the damaging role he attributes to the events of May '68 and the socio-cultural and sexual revolutions of the 1960s and 70s. Rather as Maurras singles out the *philosophes* for particular opprobrium, so one of *Les Particules élémentaires*'s central protagonists, Michel, welcomes the ridicule into which a later generation of celebrated French intellectuals – the generation of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Deleuze – has apparently recently fallen 'après des décennies de surestimation insensée'.<sup>14</sup> These once celebrated French thinkers, the novel implies, are complicit in the broader erosion of moral and social order provoked by May '68, feminism, the sexual revolution, and the adoption of individualistic ideas and practices 'en provenance des États-Unis d'Amérique' (*Particules*, p. 26). As Sweeney notes, the image of May '68 that is presented in *Les Particules* suggests that Houellebecq views the events as 'not primarily [...] emancipatory' but rather as heralding 'a damaging antinomianism that emphasized transgressive desire and egotistical individualism' (Sweeney,

p. 91). In other words, the ills Houellebecq attributes to May '68 are precisely those that Maurras attributed to the Revolution of 1789, albeit in an updated, exacerbated form.

The narrator of *Les Particules* appears to attach particular blame to feminism and the sexual revolution that took place in and around May '68 in accounting for the depressing state of contemporary French society. For example, the legalisation of contraception in France in 1967 is presented as a key first step in a process of 'libération sexuelle' that will ultimately have disastrous effects, notably by undermining the bases of the family, itself characterised as 'le dernier îlot de communisme primitif au sein de la société libérale'. As the narrator explains:

Il est piquant de constater que cette *libération sexuelle* a parfois été présentée sous la forme d'un rêve communautaire, alors qu'il s'agissait en réalité d'un nouveau palier dans la montée de l'individualisme. Comme l'indique le beau mot de 'ménage', le couple et la famille représentaient le dernier îlot de communisme primitif au sein de la société libérale. La libération sexuelle eut pour effet la destruction de ces communautés intermédiaires, les dernières à séparer les individus du marché. Ce processus de destruction se poursuit de nos jours. (*Particules*, p. 116)

The narrator's claim here that the erosion of the family has destroyed the last of the 'communautés intermédiaires' that separate and protect individuals from the market rehearses one of the central tenets of both Maurras's and Comte's social theories. For both thinkers, 'intermediary' institutions, such as the family, professional corporations, or organised religion, played a key role in society, representing collective bodies that mediated between individuals and the market or the State, protecting them from the unchecked power of both. That role had been undermined, however, by both political and economic liberalism, which

had left individuals isolated, forced to confront the power of the market and the State on their own. Hence, in an essay criticising the excessive power accrued by State institutions under Bonapartism, Maurras laments what he terms ‘[l]a destruction des sociétés intermédiaires, qui équilibraient l’État en protégeant les personnes’. This, he argues, has led to ‘le tête-à-tête subit des citoyens-nains avec l’État-géant’ revealing ‘un vide immense’ at the heart of French society (*O.C.* vol. 2, p. 362). In his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42), meanwhile, Comte identifies the family as representing ‘un intermédiaire indispensable entre l’idée de l’individu et celle de l’espèce ou de la société’ (*Cours*, p. 399). Comte believed that the patriarchal family, in which both wives and children were subordinated to the power of the husband, was essential to the maintenance of social order. He thus lamented the deleterious effects of what he termed ‘cette chimérique égalité des sexes’ on familial and social order, justifying the ‘heureuse subordination spontanée’ of wives to their husbands by a paean to women’s supposedly natural caring and maternal instincts (*Cours*, pp. 406–08).

The narrator of *Les Particules* will rehearse these Comtean and Maurrassian themes in his laments at the deleterious effects of feminism and the sexual revolution on the familial and social order of post-1968 France. Women who have pursued personal and sexual autonomy in accordance with the tenets of feminism are repeatedly depicted in disparaging, misogynistic terms, upbraided for abjuring their supposedly natural, caring, maternal roles. This is particularly the case of Janine, the mother of the novel’s two central protagonists, Michel and Bruno. She is denounced as ‘une mère dénaturée’ (*Particules*, p. 64); her life choices are blamed for Michel and Bruno’s problems; those life choices are then implicitly contrasted to idealised evocations of women’s supposedly natural predisposition to selfless ‘amour maternel’ and ‘dévouement’ (p. 91; p. 164), evocations that recall Comte’s paeans to femininity and motherhood.



Behind Comte and Maurras's laments at the destruction of 'intermediary' institutions such as the family, religion and the corporations lay the fear that liberalism would erode the social bond, dissolving the social organism itself and leaving nothing but a random collection, a cloud, or disaggregated mass of atomised individuals in their place. The lonely, atomised, selfish and meaningless lives led by Michel and Bruno in *Les Particules*, in common with so many of Houellebecq's other male protagonists, represent fictionalised realisations of precisely these fears. Houellebecq's male protagonists all suffer from the effects of the social atomisation and dissolution that conservative anti-capitalists like Maurras and Comte feared excessive individualism would inevitably provoke. As we have noted, Maurras's solution to social atomisation was to stage a return to the certainties of the *ancien régime*, to monarchy, religion, and the family, to agricultural and artisanal production organised in guilds or corporations. Comte, by contrast, proposed a rather different set of solutions. He was equally critical of economic liberalism, arguing that laissez-faire economics, characterised by its own 'mode de systématiser l'anarchie', had aggravated what he termed 'le mouvement de décomposition' provoked by 'la philosophie révolutionnaire' (*Cours*, pp. 199–200). Liberal economics, like liberal political and social theory, was, he argued, based on fundamentally 'metaphysical' principles, i.e. a speculative belief in the absolute equality and freedom of all human beings that both overlooked and undermined the importance of those institutions and practices – religion, the family, marital and parental love, the guilds or corporations – that, as empirical sociological enquiry had showed, actually defined each individual's character and capacities.

In contrast to Maurras, however, Comte maintained that 'revolutionary philosophy' had served a purpose in sweeping away the archaic social forms of the *ancien régime* and hence preparing the advent of his preferred new 'industrial age'. Nonetheless, that new 'industrial age' would require a 'réorganisation sociale' that would check the destructive

forces of individualism by submitting them to the controlling influence of reinvented forms of the family, organised religion and the corporations. The precise nature of these new ‘intermediary’ institutions would be dictated by the rational, scientific observations of the positivist sociologist. A cadre of leading industrialists, meanwhile, operating within a rationally planned economy, would secure the productive employment and welfare of all workers (*Cours*, pp. 209–336). Thus, where Maurras advocated combating liberal individualism by turning back to the past, Comte looked to the future, arguing in favour of preserving the gains of the liberal revolutions, while overcoming their failings by implementing a kind of technocratic vision of the new industrial age.

One way of understanding the futuristic visions of genetically altered neo- or post-humans with which both *Les Particules* and *La Possibilité d’une île* (2005) end is to see them as Houellebecq’s interpretations of Comte’s futuristic technocratic vision, updated for our contemporary age.<sup>15</sup> These futuristic visions of a genetically altered or cloned humanity certainly do both seem to offer a release from the ruthless and ultimately vain competition for sexual favours and emotional fulfilment in which the human characters of the two novels find themselves locked. As Sweeney points out, the experiments in genetics in which Michel engages, in *Les Particules*, seem partly Comtean in inspiration, the realisation of a fourth scientific stage that might supersede all three of Comte’s ‘theological’, ‘metaphysical’ and ‘industrial’ ages (Sweeney, p. 162). Similarly, the role of the Supreme Sister at the head of the Elohimites, a cult featured in *La Possibilité* that preaches in favour of human cloning, seems to represent ‘a nod to Auguste Comte’s feminised secular Religion of Humanity and its *Nouveau Grand-Être Suprême*’ (p. 177). Yet, as Sweeney also notes, the ‘utopian’ elements of these futuristic visions are matched by their equally ‘dystopian’ characteristics. At the end of *La Possibilité*, for example, the neo-humans ‘live in isolated, monadic compounds communicating only by means of a virtual network’ (p. 5). In this sense, the genetically

modified futures envisaged in *Les Particules* and *La Possibilité* could each be interpreted as representing the ultimate and most extreme realisation of Maurras and Comte's fears regarding individualism, atomisation and the destruction of the social bond.

If Houellebecq's critique of liberal individualism thus manifests a number of clear affinities with the tradition of counterrevolutionary anti-capitalism personified by Comte and Maurras, the precise nature of any solutions he might have to offer remains highly ambiguous. The novelist seems to oscillate between a Maurrassian nostalgia for pre-revolutionary social and economic forms, on the one hand, and a highly qualified advocacy of Comte's more technocratic solutions, on the other. This ambiguity is equally evident in *La Carte et le territoire* (2010), the novel in which Houellebecq returns to the question of productive labour, a question first raised in *Extension* but largely eclipsed by the focus on sexual relations in the intervening novels.

#### Paeans to Productive Labour

One of the most striking features of *La Carte et le territoire* is the repeated laments at the deindustrialisation of France in the face of the rise of immaterial, service sector activities that are consistently figured as inherently feminine and hence inauthentic. The novel charts these developments through its account of the career of the thirty-something artist, Jed Martin, whose various artistic projects track France's transition from industrial to post-industrial society. As Jed plots and laments this transition, he seems to oscillate between paeans to the glories of a now lost, quasi-Comtean industrial age, on the one hand, and a more Maurrassian lament at the disappearance of smaller-scale and artisanal trades and professions, on the other. The first of these options is represented by a project in which he exhibits blown-up photographs of Michelin maps of the French countryside alongside satellite photos of the landscapes they represent. This Michelin series first secures Jed's wealth and fame. It is

inspired by a moment of quasi-religious revelation experienced by Jed on picking up a Michelin map of the Creuse region in a motorway service station. In the map, he finds represented a ‘sublime’ synthesis of transformative industrial endeavour with centuries of human habitation of the French *terroir* itself.<sup>16</sup>

It is no coincidence that it should be a Michelin product that manages to achieve this unlikely synthesis of heavy industry and the French *terroir*. Although one of the first French companies to adopt American mass production techniques, Michelin remained, as the novel’s narrator tells us, rooted in a particular French locality, ‘domiciliée à Clermont-Ferrand depuis ses origines’, a family firm, ‘plutôt conservatrice, voire paternaliste’ (*Carte*, p. 66).

Furthermore, in sponsoring maps and regional guides, to encourage car use and hence tyre consumption, Michelin became a guarantor of specifically French values of gastronomy, of regional identity and history, able, then, to achieve a miraculous synthesis of American mass production techniques and the French *terroir*. However, if Jed’s series of maps and photographs are testaments to an era of specifically French, paternalist and masculine industrial prowess, they also lament the passing of that glorious age. For, as the reader learns, Michelin’s technological and industrial activities, once rooted in the French territory, have now become dematerialised, deterritorialised, and feminised. Michelin is now owned by and beholden to foreign institutional investors, notably the Russians and Chinese (*Carte*, p. 106). Jed’s primary point of contact with the firm is not with a French male engineer but with a foreign female PR executive, the beautiful Olga Sheremoyova. Olga is tasked with promoting Michelin’s recent acquisitions of French hotels and restaurants to Russian and Chinese tourists. Where the Michelin maps had embodied a sublime synthesis of nature and technology, the synthesis of *terroir* and modern conveniences depicted in the company’s new tourist brochures appears to be in bad taste: ‘Cette juxtaposition d’éléments *vieille France* ou *terroir* et d’équipements hédonistes contemporains produisait parfois un effet étrange,

presque celui d'une faute de goût' (pp. 98–9). Michelin's virile, authentically French, sublime project, rooted in material production, has thus been replaced by a feminised, foreign, dematerialised one that relies on selling a commodified simulacrum of the French *terroir* to the now dominant Russians and Chinese. In the wake of globalisation, the novel implies, France has lost its former industrial might and economic power and is hence reduced to prostituting itself, its culture, historical heritage, and gastronomy, to foreign tourists.

If Jed's paean to a lost era of industrial prowess suggests affinities with Comte's vision of the 'industrial age', elsewhere in the novel the benefits of smaller-scale, traditional or artisanal production are, by contrast, emphasized. This is evident in a series of conversations between Jed, his father (a retired architect), and the fictionalised version of Michel Houellebecq that appears as a character in the novel. All three express their admiration for William Morris's advocacy of skilled artisanal or craft labour. This is, however, a depoliticised Morris, 'ancrage socialiste mis à part, bien entendu', as Jed reflects, or before 'il s'est rallié au marxisme', as the fictional Houellebecq explains (p. 227; p. 253). Of course, once shed of its Marxist or socialist commitments, Morris's advocacy of craft production becomes pretty much indistinguishable from the return to an artisanal mode of production advocated by someone like Maurras. Indeed, in one series of paintings Jed sets out to document precisely a range of trades and professions that seem to exemplify Maurras's belief in the wholesomeness of small-scale commercial or artisanal activity, at the same time as being emblematic of traditional French identity. The first two paintings in this 'série des métiers simples' are dedicated to "Ferdinand Desroches, boucher chevalin", puis "Claude Vorilhon, gérant de bar-tabac", à des professions en perte de vitesse' (p. 116). The novel's narrator insists that it would be wrong to see such paintings as expressing any nostalgia for these traditional *métiers*, assuring the reader that Jed simply wanted to record them before they disappeared. Besides, the narrator claims, the subject of the third painting in the series

proves Jed was equally interested in new, emerging professions (p. 117). The subject of that third painting is “Maya Dubois, assistante de télémaintenance”, whose profession is ‘emblématique de l’adoption de la politique de *flux tendus* qui avait orienté l’ensemble du redéploiement économique de l’Europe occidentale au tournant du troisième millénaire’ (pp. 116–17). Regardless of the narrator’s claims, however, it is hard not to be struck by the contrast between the first two *métiers* Jed paints, both male and traditionally French, and his third painting, the epitome of feminised, immaterial and deterritorialised labour.

This sense that, despite the narrator’s claims to the contrary, Jed’s ‘série de métiers simples’ is inspired by a profound nostalgia for more authentic, small-scale commercial activities seems confirmed by his vain attempts to paint a Catholic priest. Poorly paid and marginalised, priests represent for Jed embodiments of an altruism, moral virtue and spirituality that have no place in a godless, individualistic, and basely mercantile contemporary France; for those who do not share their faith, they therefore represent ‘un sujet déroutant et inaccessible’ that frustrates Jed’s attempts to capture it in paint (pp. 97–98). If Jed’s paintings seem, then, to express a nostalgia for both Catholicism and identifiably French artisanal activities, there is one modern profession that he does genuinely admire. This admiration is represented by his portrait of “l’ingénieur Ferdinand Piëch, visitant les ateliers de production de Molsheim”, in which the Bugatti Veyron is assembled (p. 194). The Bugatti represents the one remaining exemplification of French industrial and technological prowess that Jed can find. It is produced at Molsheim, in the Alsace region of France. Molsheim also featured in the first image greeting visitors to Jed’s earlier exhibition based on Michelin maps (p. 196). Of course, Alsace plays an extremely important role in the history of the French extreme right, its loss to the Prussians in 1870 sparking a recrudescence of counterrevolutionary Catholic nationalism that peaked during the trial of the Jewish Alsatian army officer, Alfred Dreyfus. The emblematic role played by Alsace in *La Carte et*

*le territoire*, as the location of the last remnant of France's technological prowess, can surely be placed alongside the role played by both the Vendée and Rouen's Place du Vieux Marché in *Extension*. All three are locations steeped in the history of the French counterrevolutionary right; all three serve Houellebecq as emblems of what contemporary France has lost.

### Order Restored – *Soumission*

*La Carte et le territoire* is thus infused with an overwhelming sense of loss and Jed ends his days in lonely retreat in *la France profonde*. Here he engages in a range of artistic projects that not merely represent 'une méditation sur la fin de l'âge industriel en Europe' but also symbolise 'l'anéantissement généralisée de l'espèce humaine' (p. 414). This characteristically downbeat dénouement contrasts strikingly with the much less pessimistic tone of Houellebecq's next novel, *Soumission* (2015).<sup>17</sup> The novel's protagonist, François, an unmarried, disenchanted middle-aged literature professor lives, at the beginning of the novel, a typically atomised, dispiriting existence. However, the election of a French Muslim, Ben Abbas, as President and the consequent establishment of an Islamic regime in France seem to promise François a way out of his lonely, meaningless existence, while offering a solution to the decline of French society as a whole.

By mandating arranged marriage and legalising polygamy, Ben Abbas's regime offers François, and men like him, a means of escape from the ruthless and fruitless competition for a life partner in which the protagonists of so many of Houellebecq's earlier novels find themselves engaged. Further, the new President's religious convictions lead him to implement a series of reforms that regulate capitalism and reduce male unemployment, while restoring, as he puts it, 'toute sa place, toute sa dignité à la famille, cellule de base de notre société' (*Soumission*, p. 209). By increasing the value of 'les allocations familiales', the President encourages women to leave the labour market in large numbers, hence opening up

jobs for unemployed Frenchmen (p. 209). Taking his lead from the ‘distributist’ philosophies of the conservative Catholic thinkers G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, Ben Abbes initiates a series of reforms to check the power of big business, encouraging the emergence of an economy based around ‘l’entreprise familiale’ and ‘l’artisanat’ in its place (pp. 212–13). François observes these developments with considerable equanimity, even welcoming many of them. In order to retain his job in a public university, François agrees to convert to Islam. Although this does not correspond to any genuine religious conviction on his part, he clearly does appreciate the structure and moral order that organised religion brings both to his own life and to French society more broadly. As a result, François ends the novel happily anticipating the benefits of marriage and secure career that his imminent conversion to Islam will bring. As he remarks: ‘ce serait la chance d’une deuxième vie, sans grand rapport avec la précédente. Je n’aurais rien à regretter’ (p. 315).

*Soumission* thus offers a vision of a future France in which the restoration of organised religion, the patriarchal family, and small-scale artisanal production is shown to have fundamentally salutary effects for both individuals like François and society as a whole. This vision, of course, corresponds very closely to that advocated by someone like Maurras. Indeed, although Maurras called for the restoration of Catholicism, this did not correspond to any personal religious conviction on his part. Maurras was himself agnostic and his advocacy of organised religion reflected his belief in its importance as a unifying moral force rather than as a revealed truth. Comte took a similar approach; his advocacy of a new positivist religion adequate to the ‘industrial age’ reflected not personal religious faith but rather a belief in the vital role played by organised religion in securing the social bond. As Houellebecq himself remarks in his essay on Comte: ‘Comte avait bien compris que la religion [...] avait pour mission de *relier* les hommes et de *régler* leurs actes’ (‘Préliminaires’, p. 2). It is precisely on account of these functions of bonding and regulating



human society that François welcomes the advent of an Islamic regime in *Soumission*.

Indeed, the extent to which the role of Islam in the novel reflects Comtean and Maurrassian ideas is hinted at in its very title.

At one level, ‘soumission’ is simply a translation of one of the meanings of the word ‘Islam’. Yet the notion of ‘soumission’ was also central to Comte’s social theory: it is by means of *submission* to rationalised forms of religion, the family and the industrial division of labour, he argues, that ‘la réorganisation sociale’ will be achieved, ending the ‘anarchie’ unleashed by liberalism. Indeed, Comte even goes so far as to posit the existence of a general ‘instinct de soumission’ that will predispose individuals to accept the order imposed by a dominant new leader ‘à l’instant même des plus violentes convulsions politiques’ (*Cours*, pp. 438–39). It is precisely this emphasis on the role of submission in re-imposing order on a post-revolutionary French society characterised by atomisation and political anarchy that explains Maurras’s immense admiration for Comte. In the essay he dedicated to the thinker, Maurras describes Comte’s declaration that ‘la soumission est la base du perfectionnement’ as representing ‘des syllables sacrées’.<sup>18</sup> He goes on to praise Comte’s call for a new ‘Religion Positive’ as expressing ‘le sentiment de la supériorité de l’obéissance et de la soumission sur la révolte’ (*O.C.* vol. 3, p. 482).

### Sérotonine – terroir and Christianity

If *Soumission* is unusual for the optimism of its dénouement, *Sérotonine* appears to mark a return to a more characteristic pessimism. The novel’s narrator, a disillusioned, unmarried, childless, middle-aged agronomist, Florent-Claude Labrouste, lives a typically atomised existence. On the novel’s final page, he suggests the failure of his personal life probably reflects the fact that, as a culture, we have given in to ‘des illusions de liberté individuelle, de vie ouverte, d’infini des possibles [...]’. [N]ous nous sommes contentés de nous y conformer,

de nous laisser détruire par elles; et puis, très longuement, d'en souffrir' (*Sérotonine*, p. 347). Florent does not, however, blame liberalism merely for his unmarried, childless status; he also holds it responsible for the failure of his professional life. He had become an agronomist in order to pursue an ecological 'ideal', namely to 'privilégier la qualité, consommer local et produire local, protéger les sols et les nappes phréatiques en revenant à des assolements complexes et à l'utilisation des fertilisants animaux' (p. 109). However, in the face of the liberalisation of the global trade in foodstuffs and undermined by colleagues who are predominantly graduates of elite French business schools, Florent's career is marked by 'une impressionnante série d'échecs', as he is unable to defend local producers of *appellation contrôlée* French products against cheap foreign imports (pp. 29–30).

Florent thus spends much of the novel impotently looking on as French agriculture gradually goes to the wall. The destruction of French agriculture, of the communities and way of life it supports, as of the *terroir* in which these are all rooted, is personified by Florent's friend, the aristocrat, Aymeric d'Harcourt-Olonde. Aymeric struggles and ultimately fails to render his inherited estate in Normandy profitable, descending into alcoholism and disillusionment after his wife leaves him for another man, taking their children with her. At a protest against falling farm incomes, Aymeric approaches a line of riot police and shoots himself dead. In the wake of his friend's desperate gesture of protest, Florent visits a local café, being struck by 'une étrange ambiance [...] presque Ancien Régime, comme si 1789 n'y avait laissé que des traces superficielles, je m'attendais d'un moment à l'autre à ce qu'un paysan évoque Aymeric en l'appelant "notre monsieur"' (pp. 269–70). He concludes that his friend's suicide possessed a certain nobility: 'il était mort les armes à la main pour protéger la paysannerie française, ce qui avait été de tout temps la mission de la noblesse' (p. 272).

Not only does *Sérotonine* seem to express a lament at the passing of honest agricultural labour, the traditional role of the aristocracy and rootedness in the French *terroir*,

it also contains a rare suggestion of genuine religious conviction. Sporadically throughout the novel, Florent suggests that love is the only authentic value. On the novel's final page, he identifies this as a specifically Christian conception of love, the love of God for all humans and the love showed by Christ in sacrificing himself so that we might live. Florent empathises with Christ's doubts on the cross: 'Est-ce qu'il faut vraiment que je donne ma vie pour ces minables?' (p. 347). Since Florent is himself contemplating suicide, the question applies equally to him. His response, and the novel's final words – 'il semblerait que oui' – thus implies he has decided to end his life in a redemptive gesture of defiance at what he earlier characterised as 'le triomphe du libre-échange' (p. 251).

Certainly *Sérotonine* is unusual in Houellebecq's oeuvre in its depiction of an apparently genuine faith in the possibility of religious salvation. Nonetheless, it shares with his earlier novels a whole series of themes and tropes characteristic of French counterrevolutionary anti-capitalism. Indeed, as we have attempted to show, the worldview expressed across those various novels is remarkably consistent in its replaying and updating of the key elements of that tradition. The belief that a liberal, apparently egalitarian revolution, whether 1789 or May '68, has in fact merely led to intensified forms of competition and exploitation, to social atomisation and moral degeneration; the claim that political and social liberalism are inseparable from and as corrosive as economic liberalism; the lament at the decline of those 'intermediary' institutions (religion, the family, the guilds or corporations), that had regulated the market and secured the social bond – all these are at once recurrent themes in Houellebecq's fiction and key tenets of both Comte and Maurras's thought. The role played by locations such as the Vendée, Rouen's Place du Vieux Marché, and Alsace in Houellebecq's novels hints at further affinities with the counterrevolutionary tradition.

As we have noted, what distinguishes Comte and Maurras are their contrasting visions of the future: Maurras advocates a return to tradition, where Comte promotes a technocratic vision of the new ‘industrial age’ to come. Houellebecq seems to hesitate between these two options. His paeon to the industrial might of Michelin, in *La Carte et le territoire*, suggests a broadly Comtean vision of industry. The manner in which François welcomes the restoration of small-scale family businesses and the *artisanat*, in *Soumission*, suggests, by contrast, a more Maurrassian position. Ultimately, it is surely less important to decide whether Houellebecq is definitively Comtean or definitively Maurrassian. He may be neither or, more likely, some hybrid of both. Certainly, he shows no sign of embracing Maurras’s monarchism or virulent anti-semitism. More important than appending a definitive political label to Houellebecq, then, is acknowledging the broad political tradition within which he works and whose fundamental worldview and values he clearly shares. His novels repeatedly suggest that that broad political tradition has little or nothing to do with left-wing thought and almost everything in common with a conservative, counterrevolutionary anti-capitalism.

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1. Bruno Viard ‘Houellebecq est un romancier ambigu’, *Le Monde des livres*, 3 janvier 2019, accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2019 at [https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2019/01/03/bruno-viard-houellebecq-est-un-romancier-ambigu\\_5404563\\_3260.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2019/01/03/bruno-viard-houellebecq-est-un-romancier-ambigu_5404563_3260.html)
2. Michel Houellebecq, *Sérotonine* (Paris: Flammarion, 2019). Subsequent references to *Sérotonine* are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
3. Gavin Bowd, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the Pursuit of Happiness’, *Nottingham French Studies*, 41.1, (2002), 28–39 (p. 37).
4. Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. xv. Subsequent references to ‘Sweeney’ are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
5. See Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive, tome 4*, troisième édition (Paris: J.B.Baillière et fils, 1869), and Charles Maurras, *Œuvres capitales, tome II: essais politiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 1954). Subsequent references to ‘Cours’ and ‘O.C. vol. 2’ are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
6. Adam Gopnik, ‘The Next Thing. Michel Houellebecq’s Francophobic Satire’, *The New Yorker*, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015, reprinted in Oblique Studio, *Sottomissione. Rassegna stampa*, February 2015, pp. 51–6 (p. 54), accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2019 at [https://www.oblique.it/images/rassegna/mono/houellebecq\\_mono\\_feb15.pdf](https://www.oblique.it/images/rassegna/mono/houellebecq_mono_feb15.pdf). Larry Duffy has also rightly concluded that Houellebecq is ‘as radically opposed to the Western left as to neoliberalism’. However, he offers no sustained analysis of the counterrevolutionary tradition in which Houellebecq is actually situated. See Larry Duffy, ‘Networks of Good and Evil: Michel Houellebecq’s Fictional Infrastructures’, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 49.3 (2012) (211–25), p. 214.

7. Michel Houellebecq, 'Préliminaires au positivisme' in *Auguste Comte aujourd'hui*, ed. by Michel Bourdeau, Jean-François Braunstein and Annie Petit (Paris: Kimé, 2003), pp. 1–3.

Subsequent references to 'Préliminaires' are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.

8. See Éric Sartori, 'Michel Houellebecq, romancier positiviste', in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 143–53, and Sweeney, pp. 172–77.

9. For a concise survey of the scandals and criticisms provoked by Houellebecq's alleged racism and Islamophobia, see Sweeney, pp. 1–39. For a qualified defence of Houellebecq on this point, see Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 80–7.

10. A more exhaustive analysis of Houellebecq's affiliations to counterrevolutionary thought would also have to consider his debts to other thinkers, from Maurice Barrès and Joseph de Maistre to Paul Bourget. For reasons of space and because his debts to the two thinkers seem so marked, this article will, however, limit itself to a discussion of Houellebecq's relationship with Comte and Maurras.

11. Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris: Maurice Nadeau – J'ai lu, 1994), p. 100. Subsequent references to *Extension* are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.

12. Charles Maurras, 'Libéralisme et libertés', *La Gazette de France*, 3 septembre 1905, accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2019 at <https://www.actionfrancaise.net/2016/11/29/liberalisme-libertes-c-maurras/>

13. Martin Crowley, 'Houellebecq: The Wreckage of Liberation', *Romance Studies*, 20.1 (2002), 17–28 (pp. 25–6).

14. Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion – J'ai lu, 1998), p. 314. Subsequent references to *Particules* are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.

15. Michel Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard – J'ai lu, 2005).

16. Michel Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris: Flammarion – J'ai lu), 2010, pp. 51–
2. Subsequent references to *Carte* are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
17. Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission* (Paris: Flammarion – J'ai lu, 2015). Subsequent references to '*Soumission*' are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
18. Charles Maurras, *Œuvres capitales, tome III: essais littéraires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1954), p. 460. Subsequent references to '*O.C., vol.3*' are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.